

REFLECTIONS (Originally Published in *Dogs in Canada*)

We all like to think that we are, by example and otherwise, able to influence our friends on issues that we hold dear. Sociologists generally agree that we choose and hold our friends largely on the basis of our regard for their values and principles, and vice versa. But as I lay in bed one early Saturday morning, such lofty thoughts were not in my semi-awake mind. Indeed, I was barely able to free one arm from the pile of sleeping Shorthairs to answer the persistent ring of the phone. I was surprised to hear the voice of a good friend, 'Joe', who skipped the usual pleasantries and immediately stated that he needed legal advice. I struggled to a sitting position as my mind immediately cleared, anticipating that some disaster had befallen Joe or his family.

Joe was precise and business-like. Had I heard the reports on TV and radio that a number of dogs and puppies had been seized by the SPCA from a local farm. I had. Good, he replied, since he wanted me to offer advice to the woman from whom they had been seized.

I was speechless - a rare phenomenon. I had heard on the radio that this was a suspected puppy mill operation, and I was astounded that Joe would think I'd be willing to help. He went on to say that he and his wife 'Mary' had obtained their pup from this farm and had viewed the premises at that time. Both felt that the actions of the SPCA were high-handed and unwarranted.

It was immediately obvious to both of us that we were on diametrically opposite sides of this fence. It's a credit to the strength of our friendship that we were able to discuss the matter without heat. Joe acknowledged as we spoke that conditions at the farm were not "the best" and that the dogs were being kept in "less than ideal" conditions. But, he argued, this woman was doing the best she could, she herself had a number of mouths to feed, and she had the right to make a living, same as anyone else. I responded that doing one's best is not a proper standard where animal welfare is concerned, and that a person should not be keeping animals, and certainly not making a living off them, if the basics of cleanliness, warmth and shelter, nutrition and medical care could not be met. Round and round we went, with Joe raising issues of the cruelty of animal research, the far worse treatment of animals in most other countries, and even the PMU mares with their throw-away foals in our own country. What's the difference, he asked.

In the end we agreed to disagree. But later I was alternately irritated and frustrated. How could decent people hold such ignorant views! Mary and I have been friends since childhood, and our friendship expanded to include Joe on their marriage. Each had been raised in comfort and went on to university education, a good marriage and a home in an affluent Vancouver suburb. Their own dog is kept well. They are people of character and virtue, and are raising their children in a family oriented and religious atmosphere. Both are regular guests in my

home. We've talked about dogs and they've seen firsthand the care showered on mine. Yet, despite all this, Joe felt strongly on this woman's behalf.

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My perplexity increased the next day as I read an article about the rescue in the newspaper, which described "pathetic, filthy animals", "unloved little victims of a lifetime of neglect", "severe cases of lice, rotting teeth and (matted) hair", "tiny pens in a barn full of garbage" and a smell that "would knock you over".

As I read this description, I couldn't help but recall something else I'd read recently, words from the American lawyer (and Governor of Georgia), Roy Barnes, speaking about the plight of abused children:

"We can only imagine how horrifying their world must be - neglected by those meant to care for them, betrayed by those meant to protect them, battered by those meant to love them."

I too am an advocate by nature, by training and by profession. How then could I have failed so miserably in conveying to these friends a fundamental regard for animal welfare, and instilling in them some of the same values that I hold. What chance do we have as a society to eradicate the unnecessary suffering of our precious dogs, if each of us cannot enlighten those within his own assumed sphere of influence.

These questions returned to me from time to time over the ensuing weeks. And my answers? Not brilliant. Not really answers at all. Perhaps we simply tend to be reminded more of our failures than our successes, our shortcomings more than our strengths. Perhaps we must be content with just trying to make a difference, having faith that there are those whom we do indeed touch and teach along the way.